

Embodied experience in a tidal pool: An autoethnography of sense engagement: ‘A dook in the Neuk’

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic encounter reflects on my own wild swimming experience which I use as the base for an autoethnographic study of this outdoor activity. I have put myself forward as both researcher and subject. I look at the sensory aspects of the experience which include smell, touch, taste, and sound to present a more self-reflective picture of wild swimming. I report that wild swimming is an embodied experience which invigorates the senses creating a feeling of euphoria and community amongst those that participate. The research adds to what is known about wild swimming by presenting a nuanced emotional and in-depth analysis of the practice. This research shows the worth of autoethnography in reporting on the complex issues of embodied experience which in turn allows both inside members of the wild swimming community to be better understood and entice potential interest of outsiders in experiencing a new sense given by wild swimming.



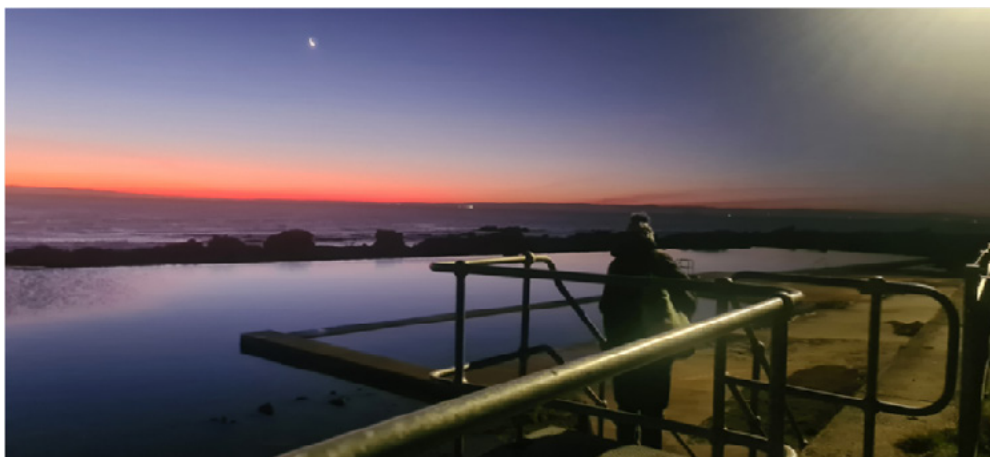
Photograph 1: High Tide

‘Bodies can move as they want, fluid and free to experience the water in diverse and inclusive ways’ (Bates & Moles 2024: 892).

There in my happy place, surrounded by sea water (Photograph 1). Breaststroke is the preferred stroke of movement for two reasons: Firstly, preventing my bobble hat from getting wet. Secondly, it allows me to part the tidal water through my fingers. Salt, on food I dislike but the taste is a satisfaction of the flavour of being outdoors. Being a participant in outdoor swimming is an addiction, as an individual, a community or knowing someone will always be there (Wise 2019).

In using Ghodsee's "use a subject you love" to conduct the relationship between experience and writing no other activity came to mind (2016: 9). The methodology was autoethnography through the "process and product" (Ellis, et al. 2011: 273) of "evocative research grounded in (my) personal experience" (Ellis, et al. 2011: 274). Although influencing the produced outcome, it makes the whole endeavour open, honest and a "thicker" (Poulos 2021) description to both "insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers)" (Ellis, et al. 2011; 275). I propose to reverse the participant observation, to "observation of participation" through Tedlock's "coparticipation within the ethnographic encounter" (1991: 69). The central aim of bodily engagement through the sensory components is at the nucleus of wild swimming: "Wild swimming is an incredible way to simultaneously numb and heighten different senses" (Wise 2019: 1). The use of the term "sensory ethnography" (Ramšak 2024: 2), through "participant sensing" (Ramšak 2024: 2) shall ground the coparticipation as my body as the subject and myself as the narrator (Ghodsee 2016).

I set an alarm. I do not trust myself to wake up before the sun does. My alarm goes off, I boil the kettle then get dressed, time is important as the sunrise does not wait on anyone. Dressed, meaning swimming costume, woolly joggers, socks, turquoise dryrobe, bobble hat and crocs. The kettle provides two hot water bottles and a flask of hot chocolate. I walk to my happy place, allowing me to emotionally prepare for getting in, being in and the ultimate twin edged sword of getting out. I like to be at the pool first before anyone else (Photograph 2).



Photograph 2: First Photo

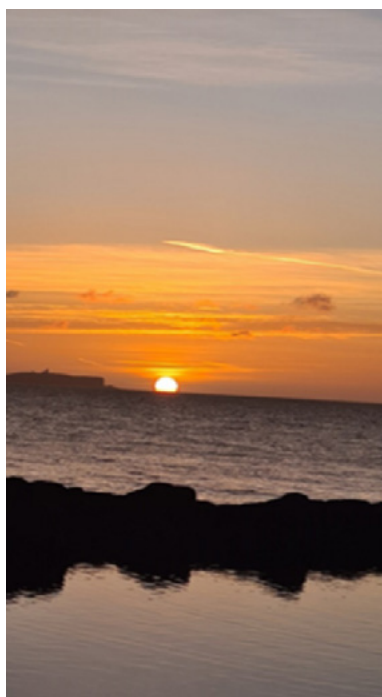
I always place my dryrobe on the same green hook, which is along the sea wall; my bag next to my camping chair and towels wrapped around my hot water bottles. Everything has been packed in order of needed, coming out is a bigger challenge than going in. I see the whole process as a rite of passage. As a special community in the water, liminality between dry land and the embodiment of being in the water. The submergence in the water brings us together as fellow "nutters" (as my father calls the activity), a community gathering to what people say, "sets them up for the day ahead" and recognition as a part of that community "a shared smile when you see someone in a dryrobe" (Bates & Moles 2024: 894).

It is a ritual to take my watch off, wet gloves, wet boots on, old crocs over them and my bobble hat over my ears. I have learned to step down the three ladder steps, take a deep breath and then sub-

merge myself in the water. All my senses come awake. I breaststroke to the far outer wall to adapt to the cold, finding my plastic octopus topped thermometer which I threw in before launching myself in.

I am first there but not for long as ‘The Nae Ritchers’ are a twenty strong group which are of cult status. They made the refurbishment of Cellardyke Tidal Pool happen, creating a happy place for many. They have their rituals. I observe. They park themselves, cars and dryrobes in the same spot. Each individual has a routine, some swim across the pool for 10 lengths, others along the pool’s edges for a certain time. I stay in until my fingers lose the lovely tingle feeling and become numb, with the ‘zinginess’ of the sea’ (Bates & Moles 2024: 896). An 80-year-old woman, who stays in for 10 minutes and gets out, says: “I love it,” she says, “It sets up my whole day”.

An interesting observation is the group who bob about and do not swim anywhere, staying in a circle, they chat, laugh and in doing so create a humanistic sound which adds to the outdoor acoustics. This sense of a “shared space and belonging, being together in the water is almost more significant than the act of swimming” (Bates & Moles 2024: 896). I prefer to feel the whole experience through my body itself. Once the initial shock of the cold water surpasses, figuring out the movement of the ripples allows me to lie on my back. I close my eyes, I feel safe, salt water is my buoyancy aid. My skin is goose bumps, cold but adapting. The intensity of cold water is part of the therapeutic sense of the whole autoethnographic experience. I feel water hit my outstretched arms and legs, breaking the tidal waves. I breathe calmly, feeling elated and in my mind, I think. I plan my day ahead, I compose an essay in my head, I feel great and then I open my eyes (Bates & Moles 2024). Others cannot focus on anything else apart from the cold and their breathing as Wise states: “It is a good way to completely empty your mind as you can’t think about anything” (2019: 1).

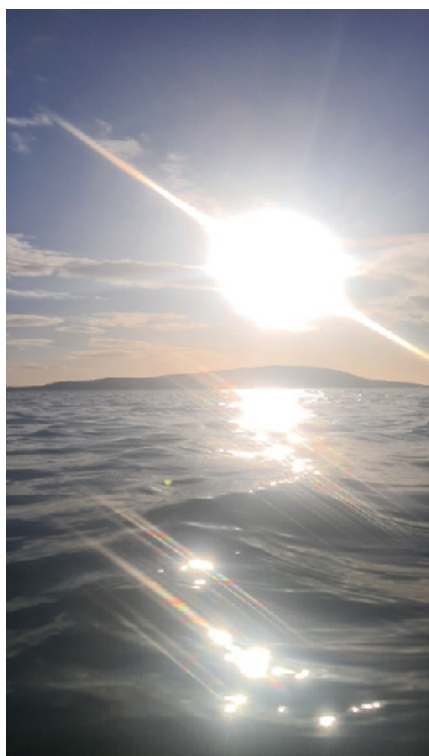


The colours change fast. From my arrival of dawn to sunrise, light hitting the clouds reflects my emotional mood. Mobiles out to capture the sunrise, waterproof cases are the new gadget of discussion (Photograph 3). Observing others, some watch the sun rise fully mesmer-

ized, others continue to swim, and some see it as time to get out. The colour change depends on the clouds, which depends on the wind and reflections off the water. Colour creates an emotional mood, combined with being submerged in the water the greys, blues, reds and reflections off the water and gradual sunlight create a contrast of calm, yet wet in the wild.

The sense of smell is of salt, seaweed and pure sea air. The sea air reminds me where I am and contributes to the whole-body sense of the experience. The scent is interrupted when others join the body of water. I sense washing detergent, deodorant and the wind carrying traces of coffee from outside the pool. The human and naturalistic “olfactory” (Ramšak 2024: 2) give a sense of interruption and return to reality. The sense of smell in this embodied experience would be heightened by new participants who live away from the sea or those who have never experienced the scents of seaweed. Sarah Pink’s “sensory ethnography” could be a future idea of a more in depth focus on “Smellscape” within the landscape of the outside pool (Ramšak 2024: 12). This methodology would add to the sensory experience and align the array of senses to complete a fully ethnographic experience.

As with taste, it is avoided by not swallowing salt water! However, this cannot always be avoided if the ripples are high, and you are swimming against them. The saltiness, like smell, adds to the whole experience of being outside, in comparison to being in a chemically scented chlorine pool. The wind adds to all the senses bringing taste through the waves, salt through smell, gusts in the ears and touch through swimming against the water (Photograph 4) (Bates & Moles 2024: 896).



Photograph 4: The Salty Water Waves

Getting out is cold. I feel amazing tingling, across my whole body. I am not cold to begin with as the euphoric feeling in my head suppresses my organs cry for heat. I look back and want to get back in, but again time is moving on without waiting on me.

Being an outside swimmer aids the autoethnographic methodology, it is raw and a truthful

reflection of the emotions. It is a whole-body experience, with all my senses coming alive. It is almost creating a new sense, one that cannot be explained without one participating: “the affect the cold water has on our bodies is powerful, with cold fingers and toes, blue lips and states of euphoria all potential reactions to the cold” (Bates & Moles 2024: 896). To use different medias with sound, provides an atmospheric realistic sensory to the pool itself. Abet high tide and moody skies adding to the sensory experience in this recording, to give a feeling of being in the water.



The photographs do not reflect the array of senses experienced during the activity; they provide a very basic visual element of the whole experience. A more creative and imaginative choice of ethnography would be recording the process while in the water (Culhane 2017). This involves gaining the permission of others and of course would depend on weather conditions. Vara’s transcript and accompanying article installs ideals of imagination and creativity throughout with the use of water, encompassing all the senses and the coparticipation (Vara 2024).

To conclude, I love the activity. Therefore, “comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research” (Ellis, et al. 2011: 276) produces an autoethnography which creates a “wider lens on the world” of wild swimming (Ellis, et al. 2011: 275). The insiders and outsiders can obtain a deeper emotional connection of the embodied activity or become interestingly engaged. The observation of the participant through coparticipation removed the stress, as I was the subject and narrator. The concentration on sensory elements provided a descriptive display and resulting analysis. The non-text media enhances the text, providing visual representation of the sensory elements (Photograph 5).

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All photographs, sound and video are my own, taken on my Samsung S20 mobile phone.